O Eternal and Infinite Lord of all nature, thou art our creator and sustainer. Thou art the author of all life, the giver of every good and perfect gift. Thou art infinite far beyond the reaches of our comprehension: before thy mystery we bow O Lord: in the light of thy lovingkindness we lift our hearts to thee: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Thou who hast created the world and all that is therein. we come to thee in a spirit of deep thanksgiving. We thank thee O Lord for the magnificence of thy handiwork, for the beauty and perfection of nature, for the colored leaf, for the fading but brilliant warmth of the Sun.

for the mind of men, which has proven so very capable of creating good as well as evil.

for our fellow men, thy children of every race and nationality.

for our nation, the its tradition of liberty and freedom. for its present witness to the dignity of man throughout the world.

for thy church, laboring in thy name, in every corner of the world.

for our church, for the opportunity of worshipping here in Freedom.

O Lord who art the decider of man's destiny, we humbly bring thee our prayer of petition, hopeful only that thy will may written in our hearts.

We ask O Lord that thou wouldst look with favor upon the efforts of those throughout the world who strive for peace. And O God we humbly pray for those who oppose us in ideology and doctrine. Be with all those behind the iron curtain - both master and slave. Make thy presence known to the communist: give comfort and peace to those who suffer under oppression and tyranny.

O God we ask that thou wouldst be present in our land: giving courage and patience to those who are denied their humanity because of their race. We pray the blessing also on those who thrive on prejudice and hatred. Give them an awareness of thy presence and thy will. Temper their anger with mercy - their irrational animosity with love.

We ask O Lord that thou wouldst be with all those who are less fortunate that we. With the poverty stricken, with those who exist in constant hunger. Be with all those who on this day are in hospitals and clinics. Help them to see that thou art always present, willing to share the burden of pain and

The Meaning of Hell October 13, 1963

There aren't too many ways for a minister to know what is a good - or what is a not so good sermon. Certainly there are differnt ways of asking the question and different categories for answering. Did the congregation like it? Did it deal with an essential subject? Was it basdd on scripture? For me, whether when a sermon is remebered ~~or not~~ it, is some indication that it at leats spoke to a certain need or question in the minds of many of the congregation. This still doesn't make it a good sermon: but it does indicate that what was said was important enough to be remembered. About this time last year I preached a sermon on the meaning of hell: and it was a sermon that I have heard mentioned and quoted even a year afterward. This week one of the circles of the Woman's association in a Bible study, found itself involved in a discussion of hell.: and it occurred to me that since you remembered the last sermon on the subject, and sisnce it is still a question of some importance in your minds, I might try it again. I thought at first that I would just give last year's sermon: but like anyone else my thinking changes in a year: and having read the last sermon I decided to give it a fresh start.

There seesm to be alot of general questioning about the meaning of hell. - in all corners of the church. And because it is such a bothersome question it is almost universally avoided. It's like a bad tooth: most of the time we aren't even aware of it. But every so often it makes its presence eloquently known: and we wish that it would go away. But it won't go away - try as we might to avoid it. I begin my sermon today by saying it shouldn't go away: we shouldn't avoid it. A concept of hell is essential in the Christian Faith: it's certainly important enough to be talked about and understood.

In the same breath, however, let me amend that statement to say Hell is not generally understood: in fact the popular conception of hell is such a gross abuse that I to o wish it would go away. The problem is that intelligent Christians, in rejecting an unfortunate and untrue image, have rejected the whole concept.

What we have then today, are two clearly defined schools or categories of thought about hell - into which most Christian fall. One talks about little else, clinging to the fiery pit with a passionate zeal: the other implicitly says there is no hell and there is no use even thinking about it or discussing it. Both are extreme and both are wrong.

The popular image of hell, the one passed down from generation to generation and guarded against any inroads of intelligent reason, is well know to us all. Hell is the place where sinners, or those unsaved persons, go after death. It is a place: a place in the bowels of the earth: its environment is usually described in terms of flames: and over it presides a horrid creature with horns, tale and three pronged pitch fork. Needless to say, hell, in popular terms is not pleasant. It is a place of torture and torment: and of course hell is a place without hope: it is eternal.

Because this conception of hell is at the center of the whole problemz: because it is this hell that people accept or reject, I wish to spend some time examining it: especially the implications it must have to our total faith.

Firstly this popular image of hell makes the Christian Faith little more than a Life Insurance, or rather a Fire Insurance policy. This, in fact, is precisely the approach taken by many Christians -- in the past and in the present. It is an approach that depends on fear. The most persuasive human emtion is fear. Suddem fear ignites a chain of physiological reactions that enable men to do the impossible. Knowing and exploiting human fear, hell-fire and brimstone preachers have gottena lot of mileage out of this doctrine of hell. With proper lighting, music and tone of voice the evangelist sets forth, in vivid detail, the horrors of hell. It was said of Billy Sunday, that when he launched into a graphic description of hell, his enraptured listeners could ~~feel~~ feel the flames licking about their chairs. And it is at this point, when the flames can be imagined, when fear takes over, that a man is prompted to act. Down to the altar he marches: he is saved and need fear no longer. But I know of no occassion where Jesus Christ frightened a man

into following him. I know of no place for this kind of irrational fear in the Christian Faith. I know of no way a man motivated by fear can even begin to understand the Love of God as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Secondly the popular image of hell must be seen in naked contrast to the God we call father. We believe that God created because it is his nature to love. We believe that God so loved man that in Jesus Christ he sufferred and died ~~in Jesus Christ~~ on his behalf. And in the same breath I cannot bring myself to say that God condemns the vast majority of his creatures to eternal torment. We all know the experience of disciplining and being disciplined: We all know the experince of punishing and being punished. We call God our Father: that is, the Father-child relationship is the best human analogy to describe the God-man relationship. Fathers know, and I speak from a little experience, that judging, disciplining and punishing are really part of loving: that love without judgment is not really love at all. And yet we all know the pain involved in punishing: we all know the longing for redemption and resumption of normal relationships once punishment had been administered. We know nothing of devising fiendish tortures for our disobediant children: we know nothing of permanently banishing them from our home because in their imaturity they have temporarily stopped lovng us. To believe that God, then is capable of punishing without mercy: to say that he is capable of rejecting his creatures forever: is to say that he is something quite different from a Father. A much better word would be a tyrant: and this kind of God I do not find in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly the popular image of hell, makes the prime prerequisite for the Christian a strong desire to save his own skin. Jesus said: "He who would find his life shall lose it" and yet if hell is what we are told it is all we really need is the selfish motive of self preservation. It was Martin Luther who remarked that a person who becomes a Christian to win salvation, will never eally be a Christian." The man of true faith, the true Chri tian, on the other hand, is he who would sacrifice even salvation. It is this note of self sacrifice, of self-giving, one'ss desores, hopes, and wishes that has always marked conversion to Christianity: and not a mad scramble to assure one's place in heaven.

Fianllay the popular image of hell is unbiblical. I will return to the Bible's understanding of hell: but for now you might be wondering about rhe source of this erroneous popular image. If it is that contradictory, where did it come from? It has a source, a very concrete source, and that is the Rennasaince. The Middle Ages saw the rebirth of the human imagination. For 1000 years men produced no art, music or literature of any significance. This period is appropriately called the Dark Ages. But suddenly came the Rennaisance. and 1000 years of frustrated, captive human imagination overflowed in an onslaught of exaggerated and elaborate detail. The human mind had been dead for 1000 years. and with its reawakening it ran wild. Two men in particular focused their imaginative genius ob the doctrine of hell. And in their works these two men created froms and images that are still accepted as religious truth. In Michaeangelo's famous work The Last Judgment, you can see God sitting on a high throne, separarting the sould of men: and you can actually see them tumbling into a huge lake of fire. This was the midieval conception and to it Michaeangelo devoted all the genius of his rich imagination. The second man was John Milton, a great and magnificent literary figure. His greatest work is Paradise Lost, which descrides in vivid detail, the sufferring of those in hell. The engravings in his book portray Satan and his assistants as beasts with tails and pitchforks: and it is believed that this particular personification of Satan is entirely Milton's. Now both of these are great works of art and literature. They are to be taken seriously by all students of culture. But they arethe works of the human imaginattion: no more: no less.

Actually therea are two Biblical words that are translated by Hell in English. When the word Hell appears innthe Old Testament it comes from the Hebrew Sheol. Like the Greek conception Hades, Sheol merely means the place of departed Spirits. There are no implications of wickedness or torment or punishment: Sheol was just where the Hebrews believed everybody went after death. The Hebrews thought Sheol was a shadowy place, without life as we know it. Itw was a sad thought for the early Jews, because in their primitive cosmology they couldn't imagine the God of the heavens

reigning under the earth. But gradually with their deepening theological awareness they realized that there could be no place: not even Sheol, thatb was not ruled by the Sovereing creator. When we affirm in the Apostles Creed that Jesus was dead and buried and descended into hell: we don't mean that he was wicked and had to be punished. We simply wish to affirm that he tasted death to it fullest extent: he truly died on the cross: in the terminology of the first century, he went to Sheol.

The second Biblical word for hell is even more intereting. It is the word that appears throughout the N,T. and whenever Jesyss Referred to Hell. It's the word that is translated hell in the passage: "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away: for it is better to lose one of your members than your whole body go into Hell." The word Jesus used here was Gehenna. It is the name of a place, in the Valley of Hinnom , just outside Jerusalem. This valley had earned a very bad name among the Jews. It was the sight of pagan worship and human sacrifice in times past. The Jews thought the valley was cursed and so they very appropriateely used Gehhena as the city dump. Evevrything that was useless was thrown there to be burned in the fire: and from the rotting garbage ~~nadnt he~~ and the burning trash came the quite true statment that "there the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." And so the word that we have taken out of context and loaded with midieval symbolism, origiannly referred to the city dump. I don't think Jesus had any intention of describing an eternal pit of tormant and fire: He was memrly using a very contemporary and graphic illustration to point out the depths of degradation a life of sin could produce. Notice again that Gehenna was not a place of punishment after death It was a symbol of what life can be, in the present tense.

In light of the Biblical doctrine of hell, what does it mean for us today? What can we say about it? Interpreting Jesus' useage, hell is where life is wasted. It is a state of uselessness here and now. Perhaps we all know of someone, brilliantly talented and gifted, who is throwing his life away. We all have seen such a person and said, "What a waste." One of th4 most depressing books I ever read was Theodore Drieser's Sisiter Garrie. In it the reader watches a prosperous man waste away doing nothing: nothing but sitting in a chair reading a newspaper:

and gradually the paper is gone: and there is nothing left at all. This is hell: t this is the hell of the city dump. Hell in Jesus's terms is life without meaning: life without meaningful relationships with other people. In his terms hell is quite real: and quite present. I think we all have tasted just enought of it to understand it and to dread ~~iyt~~ it.

Asa aplace after death there is not much we can say about Hell. The mystery of death is not one which we can fully understand. We cannot understand, or even think in terms of eternity: and so to attempt to visualize what life after death, in any form will be like, is useless folly.

We do believe however, that in love God has given man freedom. This freedom to choose makes us responsible creatures: and just as surely as God loves us: he will hold us respobsible for the way we have lived: for the way we have spent our lives. If he truly loves us, he will punish us. If he is a just God, we will be held accountable for our lives. He has given us the freedon to chose: to chose to reject him if we please. We are free to reject him : to disobey him and live apart from him : and if this is our choise we have no reason to believe that we will not be punished.

Certainly there is a hell: a separatedness from God: a state frelly chosen by man apart from the will and love of the creator. But even there God's love will not die. Even in punishment God will still be the God of Love. The Psalmist said: ("If I make my bed is Sheol, thou art there.") We needn't believe that God's efforts to redeem us - to reconcile us to himself, - will cease with death.

Hell, then, plays a essential role in the Christian Faith. It is a gentle tap on the shoulder: a reminder that it does matter how we live: that life is to be taken seriously: it says, in the words of Halford Luckock: ("Choose wisely. Ahead of you is a Holy City: But just outside there is the lonely vally called of Gehenna caled Hell.")

Amen

O God our heavenly father: help us to grow in understanding and in faith: help us to realize thy fatherhood: the care and concern for us: Help us to lowert the barriers of pride that obstruct thy redeeming love. Help us Lord to be thine own.